

OGDEN, UTAH, SATURDAY, APRIL 22, 1916.

WHAT WOULD SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS DO IF THEY WERE HERE TODAY?

POSED BY
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AND
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WE ALL admire the Shakespearean play; some of us are fond of it; those of us who are not, dare not confess it. We know that in the great bard's works are genius and

jewels of philosophy and wit, and beautiful thoughts such as are found nowhere else. We admire the wonderful imagination, the colorful weave of his romances and the masterly delineation of character. We know that he is the master poet and dramatist of all time. There is no other worthy to be classed with him. For centuries he has stood alone, and so it will be in the centuries to come. For centuries the Shakespearean has been the standard of drama in every portion of the civilized globe. He was born in England, but he belongs to no one country or age. The world claims him. We all admire his works, and yet—

If Shakespeare were alive today; if he were unknown; if none of his plays had been read or produced, what then?

Would he have any trouble getting a manager to put on Hamlet, or Romeo and Juliet, or Julius Caesar, or Othello, or Twelfth Night or Merchant of Venice?

Or, if he had the money or backing to produce the plays himself, would the public take to them?

Think over these two queries. "Put a punch into it. Make it snappy. The public wants excitement in its doses. Smash 'em between the eyes." These are the rules which govern the literature and drama of today. It is the literature and drama which the public demands, and what the public demands it gets.

There are producers perfectly willing to put on Shakespearean plays if the public will support them. The producers are more than willing; for they don't have to pay any royalties on such productions and the royalty is one of the largest expense items of the producer.

But getting back to the original query, if Shakespeare were alive today how would he write his plays? There is little doubt but what he would be influenced by the trend of modern literature. He couldn't help it. Therefore he would write in the vein of the present day, just as he wrote in the vein of his own day.

But how would his characters be transformed into modern personages?

Easy enough. You will find the prototype of "Julius," "Portia," "Viola," "Julius Caesar," "Desdemona," "Iago" and hundreds of others

a Romeo to climb the garden wall to sigh under the balcony of his Juliet. In this modern day if any young man were found sighing under a young lady's balcony window, especially the window of a young lady to whom he had never been introduced, he would be arrested as a "Peeping Tom," and, if he told the truth, he would be sent to the observation ward of the City Hospital.

But there are modern "Romeos" and "Julietes," although more conventional than the hapless pair of Verona some hundreds of years past. And if Shakespeare were living today he would know just what to do with them.

Instead of listening from a balcony to "Romeo's" sighing, the fair "Juliet" would slip out some evening and go joy riding with him, or she would meet him at the corner drug store or cafe and eat ice cream or drink wine. If she were as unconventional as the lass of Verona her father probably would complain to the ex-liege commissioner that his daughter, if he had been frequenting cafes, her father would be a powerful politician and would have influence enough to close the cafe which sold drinks to his daughter. The affair would set in the papers and create considerable scandal.

This would be the natural trend of events as far as the real "Juliet" were concerned, but the modern "Juliet" would act differently. She wouldn't be near so unconventional as "Juliet Capulet." She might go joyriding and she might slip away some afternoon and go to a suburban town with "Romeo" and be married secretly. But there'd be no sleeping potions or stuff like that, and the play would end happily. "Romeo" and "Portia" might have a fist fight over "Juliet," but it wouldn't be over her dead body. Modern sweethearts believe there are plenty of others, as evidenced by the divorce courts. It was considered eminently proper in Shakespeare's time for various noble families and their followers to get out in the streets and fight, but now our best families are not supposed to do this. There would have to be considerable changes made in the plot of the lovers of Verona, but it could be done easily.

And how about the Merchant of Venice? The modern "Shylock" would absolutely refuse to be made the goat. You wouldn't find him tottering out of the courtroom, a broken man. The modern "Shylock" would appeal the case and he would have a score of reasons for the appeal. The judge wasn't properly qualified; the judge was prejudiced, which could be easily proven, and the judge was a woman. These are only a few of the grounds for an appeal.

And then there would have to be numerous other changes in this delightful play. For instance, "Bassanio" in modern life would be



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"The modern Shylock would calmly inform Judge Portia that he would appeal the case."

within a dozen blocks of where you reside. True, it is, you might not recognize them at first in their modern clothes and in modern settings. The people of this century are the same as those of Shakespeare's time with few differences. In former days they did not suppress their feelings and emotions as we do now.

Then it was very over-the-top and romantic for

an undisciplined fortune hunter. We have fortune hunters in high society, but they are not as frank concerning their intentions as they were in Shakespearean days.

Then fortune hunting was eminently respectable and indulged in openly by the best people. Now it is an eminently respectable pursuit but one is not supposed to announce that he is going to court a young woman he has

never seen, but is after her on account of her money. Such language today would be very coarse, to say the least.

"Portia" might become engaged to "Bassanio" in the modern version, and then when she learned he was only after her fortune she would probably transfer her wealth and affection to "Antonio," who up to the last act plays the part of the goat.



"Fair Viola would wander into some cafe for a little refreshment and suddenly become aware of a husky buccooat."

"Portia" would be a suffragette. Also a college girl, and she would have her degree. She would make formal application to become a member of the I. O. O. F., and the I. O. O. F. would finally, and politely, tell her there was no chance. "Portia" one cannot help feeling, would stir up all sorts of trouble in modern surroundings. You and I have both seen her prototype on numerous occasions.

"Hamlet" and "Desdemona": Well, they wouldn't have much chance today. Even Shakespeare would have trouble fitting them in a modern setting. Both of them would be sent to their folks in some nice, quiet retreat in the country, where the handsome grounds are surrounded by high walls and there are sentries on the windows. There is no place for either in the modern drama unless they are used as minor characters in some running farce or snappy-tongue burlesque show.

There are prototypes of the adventuresome "Viola" in everyday life, but the hard heart itself would have trouble placing her in a high-class drama. She belongs to the days of the 10-20-30 thriller, in which the heroine or the heroine does male attire, either through choice or force, and must pass as a man. She never looks like a man and never even resembles the male species, but nevertheless she does stylish male clothes and has all sorts of romantic adventures and generally has a friend some man she falls in love with who is very much surprised when he is told, in the last act, his boyish-looking companion is really a girl.

In the modern high-class drama the audience, quite accustomed to the erotic drama, might have its suspicions, but in the 10-20-30 drama the audience is more wholesome and it knows very well the hero isn't wise until he is told, or rather until he sees his erstwhile boyish companion clad in a stylish pink satin dress and diamond necklace.

The fair "Viola," set down in a modern city couldn't long escape the keen scrutiny of the metropolitan police. She would wander into some cafe for a little refreshment and then suddenly she would become aware of the law, the mighty law, in the person of a husky buccooat, who brusquely takes down her name and address for future reference.

"Othello's" "Say," observes the theatrical manager to the hard after he has perused a modern version of the play: "We don't want to stir up any racial riots. This whole play is an argument for segregation, as I see it. It might take in some places if you had Jack Johnson playing the leading part—but, good night!"

And, frankly, there wouldn't be much chance for "Othello" and the gentle "Desdemona." "Julius Caesar" would go fine. Shakespeare could write a great modern political play on this theme. There have been political plays and plays of politics, and they have been great money getters, but Julius Caesar is the father of them all. The killing of a politician by other politicians is as old as politics itself, and the sleek "Erutus," the smooth "Anthony," the envious "Cassius," the wolfish "Cassius" and the man who has saved his country and then broken into politics, all are familiar to the people of all times and countries.

The Tempest would make a nice spectacular fairy play for the children, with all sorts of electrical effects and a lot of pretty girls, grotesque comedians and tropical songs.

The Merry Wives of Windsor would be re-written for some heavy-weight comedian and



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"Romeo and Juliet would be joy-riders."

would be a rip-roaring farce with few changes except in the text. The modern version of Measure for Measure would take among that class of patrons of the theaters who don't care how strong their drama is served up.

The Taming of the Shrew in modern surroundings would take well, especially with the male part of the audience. But there would have to be numerous changes; because the theater caters more to the female of the species than the male. "Petruchio" is a sort of "rough sex," and I think the way Shakespeare would treat the theme in a modern way would be for "Katharine" to tame him and administer a sort of veneer of civilization to her rip-roaring mate. That would probably catch the fancy

of the women. "Rosalind" was a rather romantic girl, but she always appeared to have more common sense than the other Shakespearean lasses who took to men's clothes. In the modern version she and "Celia" would probably go out West and buy a ranch, and "Orlando," "Jacques" and the rest of the male characters of As You Like It would reside on a neighboring ranch. They might even go to the Mexican border and a brush with Mexican bandits would furnish some excitement.

Timon of Athens, of course, would be easy in its modern setting. "Timon" is common in modern life, and so are "Lucius," "Sempronius" and "Ventidius." No trouble with that play.